

**От культурной индифферентности индифферентности к межкультур-
ной компетенции**

From Cultural “Blindness” to Cultural Awareness

Н.П.Ревякина

N.P. Revyakina

Аннотация В данной статье речь идет о развитии межкультурной компетенции студентов. Подчеркивается, что целью обучения профессиональному английскому языку в современной России является подготовка студентов к успешному овладению основными аспектами языка и приобретению знания культурных особенностей страны изучаемого языка. Приводятся методы, с помощью которых процесс межкультурного развития становится неотъемлемой частью специалиста.

Ключевые слова Межкультурная компетенция; толерантность, эмпатия, культурные ценности; межкультурные различия; взаимопонимание, условия успешного общения.

Summary The article focuses on the intercultural competence of students. It is highlighted, that the goal of teaching professional English in modern Russia is to prepare students to communicate in a way that will lead to success in their future careers. It outlines the tools that can be used to assess competence development, and propose training schemes to enhance competence. The Intercultural development methods are used for an assessment of would-be customs officers' intercultural competence – a cultural component of communicative competence.

Keywords Intercultural competence; cultural sensitivity; intercultural development; tolerance, empathy, cultural values; appreciate cultural differences; beneficial attitudes.

We live in a constantly changing global and mobile world. Contemporary world is like a “melting pot” of different cultures. From large international organizations to work teams or small groups in college classrooms with members from diverse cultural backgrounds, communicating with others is inevitable. So it is becoming important to create an understanding and awareness of cultural values and intercultural communication competence. The latter requires not only to recognize and appreciate cultural differences, but also to develop skills to interact effectively with others. The college classroom is a prime unit that enables instructors to teach students this important skill relevant in both professional and personal development.

The ultimate goal of teaching professional English in Russia is to prepare students to communicate in a successful for their careers way. The students should be able to apply these skills in a way that would lead to cooperation with their international partners. To reach this goal they need to obtain intercultural competence. We believe that the task of teaching a foreign language is not only to teach students the knowledge of the language itself but also to prepare them for intercultural contacts, in other words, to teach them to recognize cultural diversity and difference in people to teach them using the new culture of a foreign language, learn to see the others in a new way.

According to some scholars, the development of intercultural competence includes the following aspects: empathy; ability to distance themselves from their position, recognition of cultural diversity, tolerance; cultural identity. Cultural identity is understood as human conscious acceptance of the cultural norms and patterns of behavior, values, understanding of the personality from the standpoint of the cultural characteristics that are taken in a given society, self-identification with the cultural patterns of the society. We consider the following stages of intercultural communicative competence development: cultural empathy; awareness of different cultures; cultural tolerance.

We consider intercultural competence as an important part of professional communicative competence of specialists in various fields. It is very important for the students of Customs Academy as they will have to communicate with people of different ways of life, behaviors, and cultures. Language ability and explicit knowledge of cultural characteristics alone do not suffice for intercultural competence. Nor is intercultural competence acquired by visiting a foreign country. The development of intercultural competence is a long, complex and multidimensional process. It can be defined as "...the ability to communicate effectively in intercultural groups, based on intercultural knowledge, skills and reflection" [4, p. 405].

One of the attitudes beneficial to intercultural learning is therefore a general openness for and appreciation of cultural diversity and an ability to deal

with individuals from foreign cultures in an open, curious and unprejudiced manner. This openness and appreciation of cultural diversity can be promoted through cultural education or language learning. A “cultural blindness” for foreign languages and cultural backgrounds can lead to difficulties in understanding and conflict situations. A key factor in intercultural competence is openness to unknown facts and behaviors and reflection on experiences acquired.

Successful institutions, companies and employees are those who see cultural diversity as an opportunity, as something that can be learned, managed, and made use of, and who are willing to develop their intercultural competence. Foreign language teachers of the Rostov-on-Don Branch of Russian Customs Academy do their best to become a successful setting. We teach not only Russian students, but also representatives of CIS countries (Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and the Ukraine), young people from Dagestan, Ossetia, Chechen Republic, and some others. Recently we have asked 150 students of different nationalities to participate in the Questionnaire “Polycultural World of my Academy”. The results of this poll are very interesting from the point of view of the attitudes of members of different cultures to Russian culture, mentality, education and the way of life. Here are some extracts from their answers: “I feel myself at home in Russia”, “First it was a little bit embarrassing and strange, but with the course of time everything has become natural”, “It was not comfortable at the beginning, but I’ve tried my best to communicate friendly with other students and felt their support”, “Now Russia is my second homeland”, “I like everything here”. Unanimously they affirmed that they were ready to communicate with students from other countries openly and in a friendly manner. They share their views, interests and problems with Russian students. Supervisors help them in this process. Of course, developing intercultural competence is a slow, gradual learning process consisting of foreign language studies, intercultural training, and experiences of other cultures and their people. We try to focus on the following issues: customs and traditions of English – speaking countries, cultural stereotypes, celebrations, family life, sports and games, hobbies, etc.

Developing students of the Rostov-on-Don Branch of Russian Customs academy cross-cultural competence supervisors implement different methods:

- using short films, or the Internet to illustrate an aspect of the foreign culture;
- watching computer presentations about their own country and other countries;
- practicing different games;
- dramatizing situations about the foreign culture;
- role-playing situations in which people from different cultures meet;
- comparing aspects of different cultures;

With the help of all these methods teachers try to make focus on intercultural competence development alongside with linguistic skills. We also instruct students to incorporating scientific research work into intercultural competence. These methods are implemented to increase the students' motivation, to raise interest to the country by informing students about the background of the region, culture of the country, to find out what students know about the country, to include a personal approach, to start discussing challenging stereotypes.

Teachers should bear in mind that any culture is considered to develop its own way of treating some general concepts, such as time, space, nature, leadership, power, individualism, etc. We explain to our students that English-speaking countries belong to the so-called “doing cultures”. They are characterized by a positive attitude to action and initiative. Englishmen bear great responsibility for everything they do. Russian culture belongs to “being cultures” oriented basically to accepting the status quo. The effect of this attitude is putting responsibility of the action on somebody else, some forces that are out of the speaker’s control. These tendencies of the languages and cultural values may have practical and direct effect on intercultural communication. We suggest that culturally relevant information should be introduced into the process of teaching from the very beginning and permanently reinforced. So we lead our students from cultural “blindness” to cultural awareness.

The use of authentic material plays an important role in cross-cultural competence: texts from foreign textbooks, newspapers and magazine articles devoted to issues of different branches of Customs service of various countries, rules, regulations, contracts, etc. Most effectively, in our opinion, is the use of pragmatic material providing close insight into realities of the country and reflect communicative situations that are close to reality. In the field of customs business professionals have to deal with different types of texts: laws, regulations, projects, reports, forms, certificates, declarations, orders, reports, forms, various letters, etc. These texts, designed to develop the skills of professionally oriented reading, should reflect the main areas of professional communication, have socio cultural and regional geographic significance. Naturally, to explore themes such as "Customs Service of the Russian Federation", "Customs services of Great Britain (America, New Zealand, Australia, etc.), "Smuggling", "Activities of international organizations (Interpol, Europol)", "Types of crimes and penalties", "Customs Control" and others teachers select and adapt special, professionally oriented texts from the Internet, from textbooks in English for students of Customs Business, Economic, Law faculties, prepare presentations on the research topics. On the basis of these texts, teachers develop tasks for written work, lexical and grammatical tests for control by module-rating system make up portfolios for extracurricular work.

New learning environments are being developed to support and supplement the traditional ones. The term new learning environment refers to new pedagogical and educational approaches together with opportunities provided by information technology. One of the new learning environments is multimedia. Besides referring to a computer presentation, the term multimedia may refer to a media mix, i.e. text, photos, animation, video, sound, and special effects. Even if nothing can entirely replace face-to-face tuition and learning, information technology should also be made use of when providing training. In our every day activity we follow several programs, for example –“Interchange”. It is a programmed learning package consisting of critical incidents [2, p.216]. They are

short descriptions of situations where there is a problem of cultural adaptation. It's of interest to note, that these incidents are followed by alternative explanations and feedback. Trainees are expected to choose the best explanation.

In many fields of training and learning we find it possible to create real-world problems to be simulated, in other words, practice and solve them with a computer program or application. This holds true to intercultural training, too. In an attempt to create an environment where students feel comfortable discussing their own cultural values and developing intercultural communication competence, we offer them to participate in a students' scientific society "The Globe". It's a club for students of different cultures incorporating a cultural component into English language teaching and learning. We use the Culture Assimilator method approach [1, p.167] trying to develop intercultural training. The method is research-based (has its theoretical foundation, continuous feedback, and self-paced learning). Information is acquired by the process, which simulates the experience of entering a new culture. The method of "intercultural interactions" [3, p.114] is supposed to: increase intercultural tolerance and empathy, improve cultural knowledge, help to communicate more effectively, develop the ability to analyze.

Intercultural competence should be understood as part of knowledge management, as a tool of strategic thinking and planning, as a source of competitive advantage and added value, the development of which should be started as early as possible. Teachers of foreign languages do their best to become intercultural facilitators. Developing intercultural competence is developing the ability to be effective in life and career. The effect of intercultural training includes creating more cross culturally trained people. Developing intercultural competence experiences of other cultures are of major importance.

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